Espace
Art actuel

ART ACTUEL PRATIQUES ET PERSPECTIVES

espace

Towards an Alternative Aesthetics of Destruction in the Anthropocene

Sara Nicole England

See table of contents

Explore this journal

Cite this article

England, S. (2019). Towards an Alternative Aesthetics of Destruction in the Anthropocene. *Espace*, (122), 57–63.

Towards an Alternative Aesthetics of Destruction in the Anthropocene

SARA NICOLE ENGLAND

Postcommodity, *Each Branch Determined*, 2017. Screenshot.
Virtual reality experience. Courtesy of Initiative for Indigenous Futures.
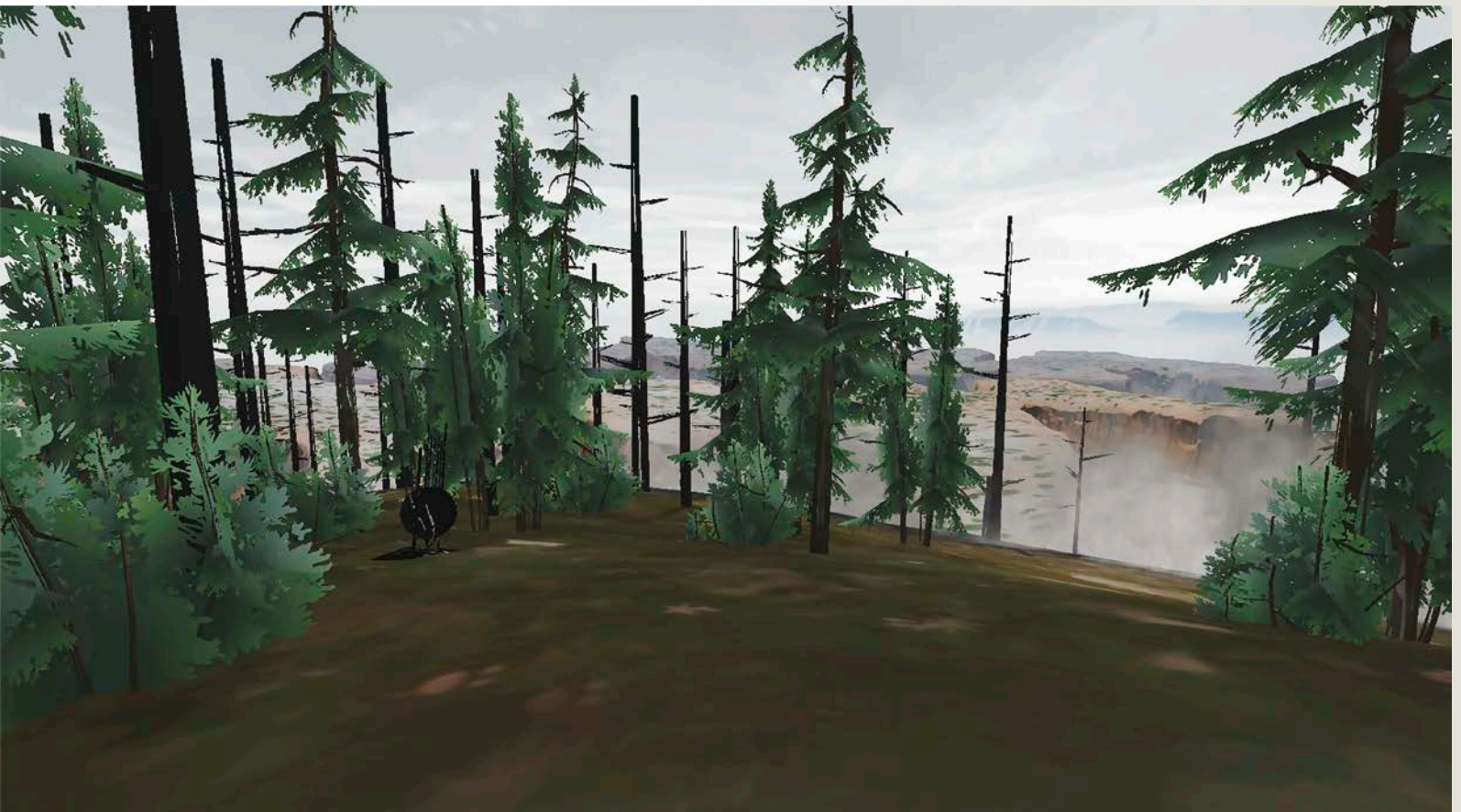
We are living in a time of insurmountable upheaval wherein representations of climate catastrophe in popular media and in art are pervasive and familiar. In a recent *Canadian Art* review on the Art Gallery of Ontario's mega exhibition *The Anthropocene*, Jayne Wilkinson questions the usefulness of artistic representations of planetary destruction. In the author's view, many visual renderings (particularly Edward Burtynsky's large-scale aerial photographs in the exhibition) provide a distant and comfortable vantage point from which we can view climate destruction at ease without having to live it. Instead of inciting action or revealing new truths, such images neutralize consumption and even contribute to our compliance with profit-driven industries. This leaves Wilkinson to conclude: "it is dangerous to continue to uphold the aesthetics of destruction."[1]

Among these issues, the trouble with images of ecological destruction is that they often fail to connect ecological devastation to the social, political, and economic processes that shape and are shaped by climate change. Or as T.J. Demos specifies in greater detail, "we cannot address climate justice adequately without also targeting the corruption of democratic practice by corporate lobbying, or the underfunding and failure of public transportation systems, or Indigenous rights violations by industrial extractivism, or police violence and the militarization of borders."[2] While climate change is a global problem, it disproportionately impacts poor, racialized, and oppressed communities and is the direct result of colonial and imperialist projects of dispossession and extractivism of peoples, lands, plants, and animals.[3] In writing about the effects of colonization in North America, Kim Tallbear writes, "Kinship obligations to nonhuman kin were also violated by the settler state. The decimation of humans and nonhumans in these continents goes hand in hand."[4] An aesthetics of destruction that ignores this relationship between the Anthropocene and colonialism risks deepening the inequality of climate change. As Zoe Todd and Heather Davis write: "In order to adequately address climate change and other environmental catastrophes we also need to seriously think through and enact processes of decolonization."[5]

Within Wilkinson's critique of the "aesthetics of destruction" is a long trajectory of destructive tendencies in environmental art history. Land artists (think Robert Smithson and James Turrell), for example, exploited land degraded by industrialism and capitalism for its aesthetic possibilities; systems artists (like Hans Haacke and Robert Barry) experimented with multiple ecologies but often privileged abstraction over context; contemporary land artists and landscape photographers, today, such as Burtynsky and others, in some ways replicate early representations of colonial expansion by presenting destruction for visual consumption with neutrality rather than nuance.

Contemporary depictions of humankind's geological impact on the Earth, such as the aforementioned ones, are often depicted from a floating perspective made possible through aerial photography. They are part of a "condition of visuality" Irmgard Emmelhainz refers to as "groundless seeing," a groundlessness which "characterizes the Anthropocene, as we lack any ground on which to found politics, social lives, or a meaningful relationship to the environment."[6] This groundlessness is about a deep disconnection with whom we share the planet, and when put in action, groundlessness as a state of being serves the interest of corporate profit above relationships with other-than-human entities, a division that has formed our current epoch.[7] Simply put, visuality is linked to worldviews and the ways in which we visualize the world have consequences on how we act within it. Given our condition of "groundlessness," how might we imagine an alternative aesthetics of destruction that gives way to care, relationships, reconciliation—or, in other words, enacts the processes of decolonization Todd and Davis set forth?

Each Brand Determined, a virtual reality (VR) experience by the Indigenous arts collective Postcommodity, travels through a digitally rendered landscape of New Mexico. Created in 2017, the work is part of a broader initiative entitled *2167*, a touring exhibition in which Indigenous artists in North America were commissioned to create VR works that looked forward 150 years. As a counterpoint to that year's celebrations of "Canada 150," *2167* critically responds to Canada's history of colonialism by projecting visions of the future in which Indigenous peoples and cultures are central and thriving.
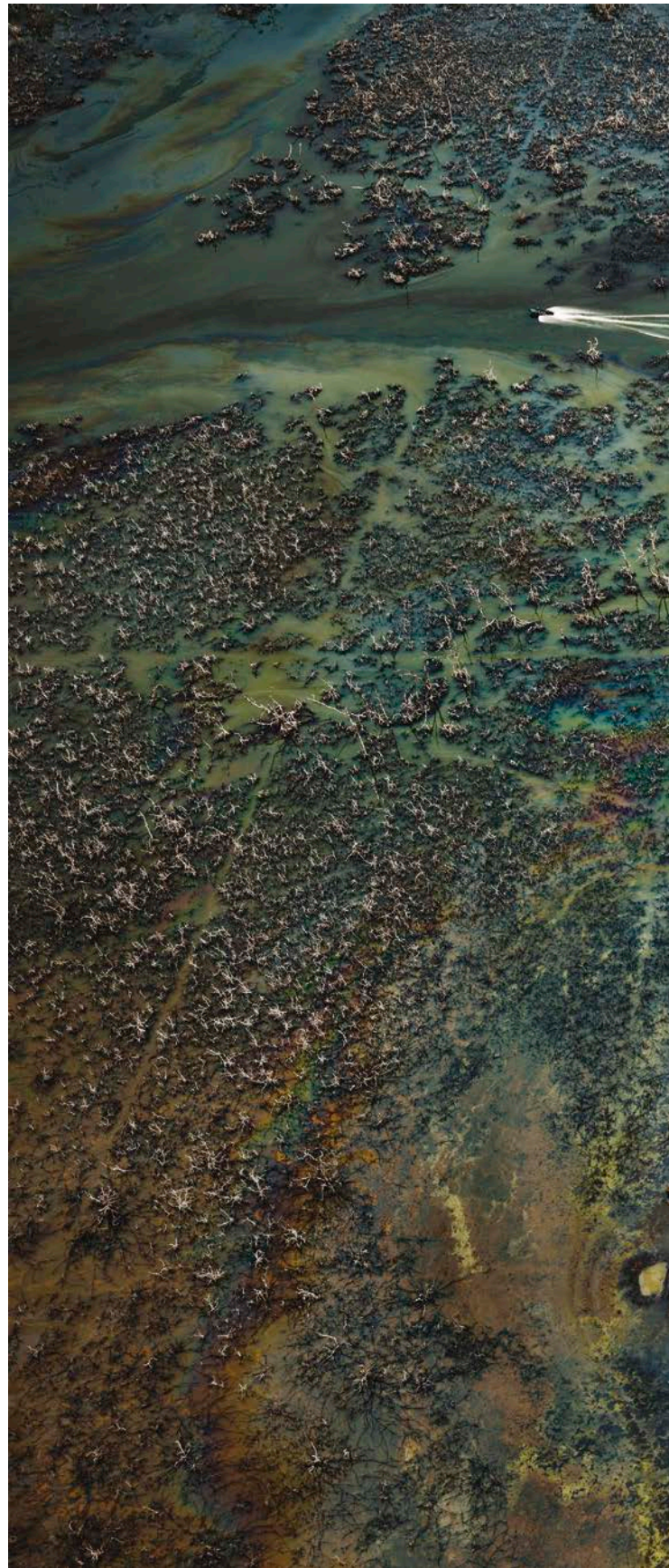
Each Branch Determined is an "on rails" VR experience; the viewer moves through the environment on a pre-determined, linear path. Initially situated in a burning forest, the viewer turns away from the forest fires and descends a mountain slope into an unburnt wooded area. As the viewer moves through the New Mexico desert terrain with elevated plateaus and smooth plains, birds fly overhead and mountain goats graze in the distance. A voice relays technical information: details about a complex underground drainage system installed beneath the forest. Metal structures with drainage pipes dot the landscape. Propelled further into the environment, the viewer comes across a circle of ravens whirling above a crater. The crater is filled with digital noise, a glitchy substance in an already charged environment, and a ladder that leads into the basin. Taking the ladder, the viewer enters a dizzying abstract space where they are held motionless, static noise drowns the speakers, and the viewer is left with a mirage of television colour bars bleeding together and forming static waves.

With few guidelines provided, viewers might conclude that *Each Branch* is yet another and by now familiar visualization of the end of the world, a fiery farewell to a planet exhausted by human activity. However, the burning forests in *Each Branch* are not a result of ecological destruction, they are a component of forest regeneration and created from an imagined collaboration between Native Americans and Xicano pueblos to exercise shared regional land management. In this ecology, fire and technology are integral parts of the collaboration. *Each Branch* imagines new social formations amongst Indigenous populations, machines and the environment while employing visual tropes Western culture associates with apocalyptic scenarios and

Postcommodity, *Each Branch Determined*, 2017. Screenshot.
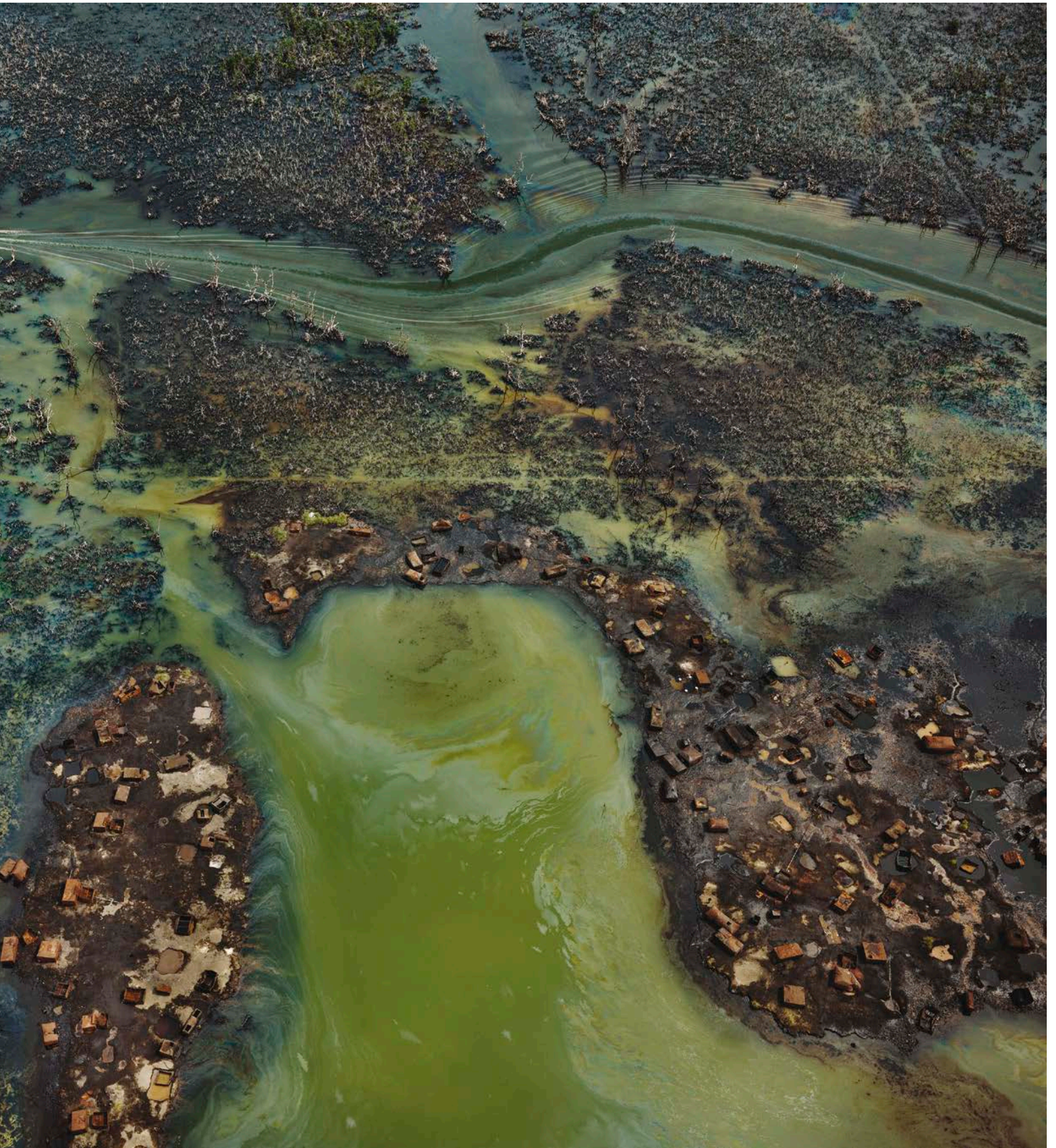Virtual reality experience. Courtesy of Initiative for Indigenous Futures.

unoccupied or uninhabitable landscapes. We carry assumptions about what a healthy ecosystem looks like, and by using these tropes, Postcommodity calls attention to their limitations and how certain ways of seeing restrict our ability to imagine alternatives to our current condition.

Instead of a vision of greenery and abundance, *Each Branch* delivers smoke and fire–motifs popularly associated with the world's ending rather than its regeneration. These images of destruction unsettle normalized images of ecological ruination from their place of familiarity and even passive acceptance. Instead of presenting the current condition as self-evident, *Each Branch* uses these tropes to jolt us into imagining alternative ways of being and looking at the world. "What we often think of as natural landscapes, are in reality unhealthy, overgrown, suffering ecosystems," writes Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation member Alicia Cordero, referring to the importing of species from Europe to "improve" the landscape.[8] The environment of *Each Branch* could read as what Timothy Morton terms an "ecology without nature" in which the false ideas of "nature" (as distinct from culture) are relinquished to adequately approach ecological forms. This concept of nature that lingers today is rooted in colonial notions of the "untouched landscape" and "wilderness." Paintings of the American West, such as those by Albert Bierstadt or Thomas Moran, showing a virginal and bountiful landscape were used to justify colonial expansion. Yet, Indigenous populations intricately managed these supposedly uninhabited places. If we are going to adequately address our current situation, we need to decolonize the Anthropocene and envision alternative relationships that work against the groundlessness Emmelheinz describes. For many Indigenous peoples, these relationships to humans, other-than-humans, and land have been shared and respected for millennia in spite of colonialization and genocide.

Each Branch promotes Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and land rights not only in the present but also as a necessity for the future. In *Each Branch*, the viewer is situated in a landscape void of humans and without an avatar, and thus, could be inhabiting the perspective of a machine responsible for monitoring the health of the ecosystem. At one point, the voice detailing the land management processes narrates that the drainage system is "laid on a bed of approved materials, properly supported," indicating collaborative and consensual organization. *Each Branch* articulates advanced understandings of fire ecology, visualized in the controlled burning practices that are part of some Indigenous nations' Traditional Ecological Knowledge but have been suppressed through colonization. In response to the devastating forest fires in California, Cordero wrote: "Traditional Indigenous landscape management in California has always utilized a sophisticated understanding of fire ecology. Fire is an integral part of the system in which we live. We cannot choose a life without fire, but we can choose healthy, knowledgeable relationships with it."[9]

Edward Burtynsky, *Oil Bunkering #4*, 2016. Niger Delta, Nigeria.
Courtesy of Metivier Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Edward Burtynsky.

The alternative aesthetics of destruction presented in *Each Branch Determined* envisions healthy, knowledgeable relationships with other-than-human entities, including machine technologies and fire, in ways that directly oppose the groundlessness Emmelhainz describes. It imagines a future for climate justice in which Indigenous Knowledges and land management are exercised freely. By bringing the Anthropocene and colonialism into dialogue, *Each Branch* provides a nuanced vision of destruction, one that turns the popular aesthetic vocabulary of ecological destruction into a visual critique of the system from which those representations are produced. In doing so, *Each Branch Determined* brings decolonialization to the centre of the Anthropocene, to a future place where Indigenous sovereignty determines ecological processes.

1.
Jayne Wilkinson, "What Images Don't Do," *Canadian Art*, December 12, 2018. https://canadianart.ca/essays/what-images-dont-do/.
 2.
T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 12.
3.
Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal on Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 763.
 4.
Kim Tallbear, "Failed Settler Kinship, Truth and Reconciliation, and Science," 2016. http://indigenoussts.com/failed-settler-kinship-truth-and-reconciliation-and-science/.
5.
Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, op. cit., 774.
6.
Irmgard Emmelhainz, "Images Do Not Show: The Desire to See in the Anthropocene," *Art in the Anthropocene*, Etienne Turpin and Heather Davis (eds.), (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 137.
7.
Other-than-humans is a term used by Todd and Davis (2017) and borrowed from Tallbear's term "other-than-human relatives" in "Failed Settler Kinship," 2016.
8.
Alicia Cordero, "We Cannot Choose a Life without Fire," *Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation*, November 17, 2018. https://www.wishtoyo.org/wishtoyo-chumash-foundation/2018/11/17/we-cannot-choose-a-life-without-fire.
9.
Alicia Cordero, Ibid.

Sara Nicole England is a white settler and a recent graduate from Concordia University's Art History MA program (Tiohtià:ke/Montreal, QC). She is the research coordinator for Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace and Initiative for Indigenous Futures and researches, writes, and organizes around histories of art and design. Sara has curated exhibitions and programs with Images Festival, Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, the British Institute of Florence, Project Gallery and McIntosh Gallery. She has a forthcoming chapter in *Design and Agency: Critical Perspectives on Identities, Histories and Practices* published by Bloomsbury.

Edward Burtynsky, *Clearcut #4*, 2016. Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Courtesy of Metivier Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Edward Burtynsky.